

MIMNERMUS

- 1 What's life, what's joy, without love's heavenly
gold?
I hope I die when I no longer care
for secret closeness, tender favours, bed,
which are the rapturous flowers that grace
youth's prime
for men and women. But when painful age
comes on, that makes a man loathsome and vile,
malignant troubles ever vex his heart;
seeing the sunlight gives him joy no more.
He is abhorred by boys, by women scorned:
so hard a thing God made old age to be.
- 2 But we are like the leaves that flowery spring
puts forth, quick spreading in the sun's warm light:
for a brief span of time we take our joy
in our youth's bloom, the future, good or ill,
kept from us, while the twin dark Dooms stand by,
one bringing to fulfilment harsh old age,
the other, death. The ripeness of youth's fruit
is short, short as the sunlight on the earth,
and once this season of perfection's past,
it's better to be dead than stay alive.
All kinds of worry come. One man's estate
is failing, and there's painful poverty;
another has no sons—the keenest need
one feels as one goes down below the earth;
sickness wears down another's heart. There's none
Zeus does not give a multitude of ills.
- 3 Most handsome once, perhaps, but when his
season's past,
he's loathed and slighted even by his sons.
- 4 He gave Tithonus* an unending bane,
old age, that is more frightful than harsh death.
- 5 The sweat runs down me, and my heart's a-flutter,
seeing my generation in its bloom

of joy and beauty. Oh, it ought to last
 for longer! But it's fleeting as a dream,
 our precious youth; in no time ugly, harsh,
 hateful old age is looming over us,
 unvalued, that enveloping deforms
 past recognition, dims both sight and mind.

6 I pray my fated death may catch me
 hale and hearty at threescore years.

7 Enjoy yourself. As for the wretched townsfolk,
 some will speak ill of you—but only some.

8 Let us be honest, you and me.
 It is the rightest thing to be.

9 Aipy we left,* and Neleus' city, Pylos,
 and came by ship to Asia's lovely coast.
 We settled at fair Colophon with rude
 aggression, bringers of harsh insolence;
 from there we crossed the river Asteïs (?)
 and took Aeolian Smyrna by God's will.

11, 11a

Jason would not have brought that great fleece* home
 from Aea at the end of that ordeal
 he suffered for the arrogant Pelias;
 they'd not have reached the river of World's End.

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Aeetes' city, where the swift sun's rays
 are stored in a gold chamber by the edge
 of the world stream, where godlike Jason went.

12 The sun must toil along day after day:
 there's never any break or rest for him
 or for his horses, once rosefinger Dawn
 leaves the world stream and climbs into the sky.
 A wondrous couch bears him across the waves—
 winged, by Hephaestus intricately wrought
 in precious gold—as he in grateful sleep
 skims o'er the sea from the Hesperides
 to Aethiopia,* where a chariot
 and steeds await the early birth of Dawn;
 and there the god mounts his new equipage,
 Hyperion's son.

- 13a So when the king had given his command,
they charged, protected by their convex shields.
- 14 His strength and bravery were not like yours,
as I have heard from older men who saw
him on the plain of Hermos* with his spear
routing the Lydian cavalry's thick ranks.
Pallas Athena ne'er had cause to fault
his acid fury, when in the front line
he hurtled through the battle's bloody moil
against the stinging missiles of the foe.
No warrior of the enemy remained
his better in the strenuous work of war,
so long as he moved in the swift sun's light.

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- 4 *Tithonus*: the mythical Trojan whose beauty so appealed to the Dawn-goddess that she carried him off for herself. She begged Zeus to grant him everlasting life, which he did; but she had not thought to specify everlasting *youth*, so he just gets older and older and older.
- 9 *Aipy we left*: a town in Messene. Mimnermus refers to the legend of an early migration from Messene to Asia Minor.
- 11 *that great fleece*: the Golden Fleece that the Argonauts journeyed to a distant eastern land to get. This was a task laid upon Jason by Pelias, king of Iolcus.
- 12 *Aethiopia*: the land of the mythical Aethiopes, who dwell close to the sunrise. Only later was the name settled on the people of Sudan.
- 14 *Hermos*: a river north of Smyrna, now the Gediz. This battle in which the Smyrnaeans beat off the Lydians probably took place in the 660s. We cannot identify the heroic warrior whose qualities Mimnermus contrasts with the feebleness of his hearers.